

***White House Conference on Aging ~ Policy Committee
June 21, 2005 ~ Santa Clara University***

Members of the Policy Committee for the White House Conference on Aging, Education and Business Leaders from Silicon Valley and the Bay Area, Colleagues:

My name is Susan Hoffman. I am the founding director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at San Francisco State University. The Institute, now in its third year, is an innovative educational program that serves people over 50, and is among 100 institutes operating or in development within universities and colleges across the country, creating a critical mass of lifelong learning programs, of which there are more than 400 nationwide.

The growth of this national network of programs reflects the synergistic intersection of a unique demographic moment -- in which for the first time in recorded history, there will be more elders than children, and recent discoveries by neuroscientists who are challenging long-held conventional wisdom about how people learn. It is now being demonstrated that old dogs *can* learn new tricks, and that their ability to generate new neurons and burn new neural pathways is strengthened and maintained by specific types of cognitive behaviors – particularly using the right brain functions for creative expression.

In preparing for this testimony, therefore, I was surprised to find that although Education is mentioned in committee reports and previous testimony, the obvious and profound role it must play in the ‘longevity revolution’ has not been adequately recognized. A growing population of aging Americans are already seeking activities which will not only keep them busy, but will keep them *learning*.

It is my broad recommendation to this committee that support must be strengthened for educational institutions and for programs which help to service this need for learning. The university is uniquely situated not only to provide classroom instruction to older adults, but to be the public space for the development of discourse and innovation in addressing issues concerning longevity. The role of the university is complimented by public media and nonprofit organizations. I see four major areas in which this effort can be focused.

Recommendation #1: Provide more funding for teaching and learning and research on teaching and learning older adults.

At SFSU, we have envisioned how the university would approach the older learner with a comprehensive, accessible, and innovative pedagogy. We recommend planning, program design and implementation grants to help institutions of higher education further develop strategies for lifelong learning.

Within the Osher network specifically, we are in need of additional funding to match and maintain the private money which has allowed SF State’s OLLI to lay a foundation and

create a strong model for how such programs can provide valuable services to the community. A precedent for such support was established last year when Congresswoman Lynne Woolsey secured a Department of Education line item for four Osher Institutes in California. We need more of this type of support.

Recommendation #2: Increase opportunities for service learning.

I reiterate the recommendations recently made in your forums on Civic Engagement, and add a call for a new Peace Corps that will bring older adults into international service. Service learning is an important way to connect expertise and experience with real human need.

Recommendation #3: Provide incentives for employers to hire older adults.

You have heard this before. Many of my constituents over 65 need to earn another \$500-1,000 to make ends meet, and are eager to continue contributing to their communities through challenging and meaningful work which will also keep them learning. I recommend a work subsidy program that provides these “working retirees” a chance to work in community-based organizations and learn new skills.

Recommendation #4: Maintain the integrity and expand the access of our public media, including the Internet.

My constituency depends upon these forms of media as sources of information and analysis of current local and international events, history, science and humanities – constant, diverse, and free opportunities for learning. We must keep the mandate for public TV and radio to serve the public good and keep them free from ideological or market pressure.

Additionally, provide incentives for media makers (and educators) to depict older people and aging in a socially relevant way. In 2003, California Senate Bill 953 (co-authored by Senator Vasconcellos who served Silicon Valley for 38 years) raised public awareness on the images projected and the invisibility of older adults. OLLI-SFSU has developed a DVD to stimulate more dialogue about these issues.

Finally, maintain public engagement and investment of high-speed Internet access. Cities should be encouraged to construct coalitions of stakeholders who can determine how this public resource is best utilized. Similarly, we urge the support of the Digital Opportunity Investment Trust Act (DO-IT) that is being considered by Congress.

On behalf of my university and my colleagues within the growing network of lifelong learning programs, I ask that you find an integral place in your agenda to explicitly address the educational needs of older adults. Please recognize the vital role that educational institutions and public media outlets play in keeping this population healthy and engaged in their communities.